



Texas Recovery After Katrina, Rita

By U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

The public face of Houston has been shaped in the past 105 years by two of the most destructive hurricanes known to mankind. Neither hit the city directly.

In 1900, Galveston was poised to be the top port on the third coast. Then a devastating hurricane hit Galveston hard that year, and much of the traffic that had passed through Galveston Bay prior to the storm began docking instead at the newly constructed Port of Houston. Within years, Houston became what Galveston was to have been.

In August 2005, another deadly hurricane changed the face of Houston in a different way. Hurricane Katrina gave the world an image of a city that opened its arms and asked no questions, giving shelter to hundreds of thousands of desperate Louisianans.

Many Texas cities shared heart and home with evacuees. San Antonio, Dallas, Austin and rural communities in East and West Texas did more than their share. Texas A&M opened Reed Arena, and cadets pitched in. The North Texas Food Bank redoubled its efforts. As expected, the Scott & White hospital in Temple performed miracles.

But more evacuees found refuge in Houston than in any other city in the nation. I took particular pride as a Texan when I watched the positive relief efforts in Houston. Those pictures provided a hopeful counterpoint to earlier pictures of traumatized Americans, dehydrated and marooned on their rooftops, and of emergency response teams unable to cope with the tragedy. After that darkness, the Houston community provided light.

We also saw that government disaster response can be both compassionate and efficient. Harris County Judge Robert Eckels in particular received national attention for his tireless, caring and sensible efforts to get the job done.

Our state can always be counted on to render aid in the most trying times. The Republic of Texas evolved from the sacrifices of men who were not born here, but who embraced the generous, helpthy-neighbor principles of the frontier. We are a God-fearing state that lives by the most golden of all rules: do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

When the moment calls, in disaster or war, Texans respond. They become fearful—not of failing—but of failing to do enough.

I've received numerous words and notes of appreciation from the people of Louisiana. Texas hospitality is even better known now than it was seven months ago.

Sadly, Katrina was a disaster that continues to unfold. The problems it brought were compounded by Hurricane Rita, which slammed southeast Texas just a month later. All has not been calm after the storm.

The most pressing concerns are economic. Local governments have stretched their purses to provide emergency assistance, social services and law enforcement. The state government has spent money on education and healthcare for evacuees.

As of March 2006, more than 400,000 Katrina evacuees are still in Texas – about 150,000 of them in Houston. One apparent ongoing problem is an increase in crime, possibly attributable to a small number of evacuees.

City leaders continue to impress upon the congressional delegation that Houston's housing, education and healthcare resources are also being stretched to the limit due to the city's generosity. For instance, about 38,000 students from Louisiana and Mississippi were still in Texas public schools as of March 2006.

The federal government is committed to making whole those who were affected adversely by the storms. I'm working with the entire Texas congressional delegation to ensure this happens in a timely manner. Some reimbursement has already been made, but the federal government must be responsible in recognizing the financial burdens placed on local Texas governments by these natural — and national — disasters.

Someone once said that real defeat – the crushing of spirit – can only come from within. Houston and its neighboring communities, big and small, have suffered through major storms like Katrina and Rita and the wake that follows. But Texans always handle adversity well, and emerge strong as a result. I'm sure we will again.

Sen. Cornyn is a member of the following Senate Committees: Armed Services, Judiciary, Budget, Small Business and Entrepreneurship, and Joint Economic. He is also the chairman of the subcommittees on Immigration, Border Security and Citizenship and Emerging Threats and Capabilities.